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**A Constructivist's Journey: From PCP to Social Constructionism- and back?
EPCA conference, Queen Mary University of London**

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In this presentation I want to comment on what I see as the location of Personal Construct Psychology within the field of psychology more generally, and particularly in relation to the theoretical perspective that has come to be known as social constructionism. But it is also an account and a history of my own intellectual journey over a period of nearly 20 years. The reason why I have decided to present my thoughts in this narrative way is that I do not hold with the hard science view that the academic and personal are separate realms. One's intellectual sympathies are *very* personal, and are intimately connected to one's experience, biography and at a superordinate level one's values and beliefs. This presentation, then, is just one person's construction.

My long association with Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) began, like so many things that are lasting in our lives, with something of great personal relevance to me. I have just finished writing a chapter for Richard Butler's new book "On Reflection: Emphasizing the Personal in Construct Theory" where I reflect in some detail about this, but I will just say enough about it here to give you an idea of what started it all off.

Back in 1983, when I was offered the modest position of temporary part time lecturer at what was then Huddersfield Polytechnic I was utterly terrified. I remember driving home from the interview, my mind dangerously pre-occupied with the knowledge that in a very short while I would be teaching undergraduates. Suddenly, it didn't seem all that long ago that I was an undergraduate myself.

By obsessively over-preparing for every lecture, I somehow got through the year but I was plagued by the thought that my colleagues would see that I was not a

'real' teacher', and that the students would uncover my 'true' identity as a wife and mother posing as a university teacher. In my mind, I continued to just 'get away with' being an impostor- but the appalling revelation seemed just around the next corner. I put myself on a treadmill, engaging in more and more anxious preparation each time, always fearing that the next lecture would be the one where I would be unmasked.

It seems obvious to me now that the real problem was not about becoming more knowledgeable or proficient. It was about bridging the gap between my self-construal and what I thought of as 'a lecturer'. However, at that time I was not able to represent the problem to myself in these terms.

It was at this time that I first became acquainted with Trevor Butt, who was then teaching at Huddersfield and subsequently became a longstanding and most trusted friend. Trevor had at the time been in regular practice as a psychotherapist with an intellectual home in PCP. His role as a psychotherapist probably gave me the confidence to reveal my insecurities to him, and he listened sympathetically and encouraged me to reflect on my experience with some good questions. What, he asked, was my 'evidence' for my assertion that I wasn't a proper lecturer or an effective teacher? What was the worst thing that I imagined could happen, my 'nightmare scenario'? Trevor then insisted that I tell him of events that could be seen as evidence that I was in fact a good teacher, for example comments from students and other staff. It all sounds so obvious now, but at the time it really was a change of perspective for me that I had not been able to begin for myself. Like most people embarking on a process of fairly radical personal change, I believe I probably also exhibited some of what George Kelly meant by 'hostility', for a while stubbornly holding on to my construal of myself and my belief in my personal failings and refusing to acknowledge counter-evidence because, again like most of us at least some of the time, I preferred to be right rather than happy. As Trevor Butt puts it in his engaging new book on George Kelly (Butt, 2008), hostility is insisting that we are right when we

sense we are wrong. In PCP terms, I was pursuing a strategy of definition rather than extension of my construct system.

I gradually came round to the idea that the problem lay in my personal construal rather than my teaching skills, and of course in the process I began to learn about PCP and its view of personal change. Trevor stepped up his efforts to help me by bringing in some structured techniques: he talked me through a repertory grid, asked me to write a self-characterisation sketch and proposed that I act out a 'fixed role' we wrote together. These were very helpful in setting me firmly on the road to personal reconstrual. And the entire episode marked the beginning of my commitment to constructivism, an epistemological stance that has been the bedrock of my academic work for the last twenty years. So it was the capacity of constructivism to make sense of my problems that led me further into it as an academic.

As I began to read more about PCP, one of the concepts that seemed to me particularly useful was that of metaphor. Kelly had suggested that construing can be thought of as behaving propositionally, 'as-if' the world were this or that kind of place and in the 1970s this had been elaborated by the construct theorist Miller-Mair (Mair, 1976), who wrote of our construing as a 'passionate pretence'; we must never lose sight of the fact that our construal of the world is a wholehearted but temporary commitment to a metaphor- to treating novel events 'as if' they were like something with which we are more familiar in order to get a grasp on them. In principle, this idea is similar to Moscovici's concept of 'anchoring', which is part of his theory of Social Representations.

As it turned out, this was the beginning of a personal journey in constructivism and social constructionism that has continued throughout my academic career. I can trace it back to the realisation that I had come across something along the lines of what I had been reading about roles, pretence and metaphor when I was a PhD student back in the 1970s. My PhD was actually on a very different kind

of topic- individual differences in susceptibility to hypnosis. Many psychologists will have heard of the venerable Ted Sarbin, who died only recently in 2005, but fewer may know that in the 1960s he had published a number of papers on hypnosis, and so he was a fairly prominent figure on my academic map. I remembered that, as part of my researches, I had read several publications by him in which he, unusually, advocated role theory as a framework for understanding the behaviour of the hypnotic subject (eg Sarbin, 1954).

I recalled that Sarbin (Sarbin, 1976) had also proposed, drawing on the ideas of his Berkeley colleague philosopher Stephen C. Pepper, that what he referred to as the 'root metaphor' for psychology should not be 'mechanism' (a psychology of causes) but 'contextualism'. In taking contextualism as our root metaphor for psychology, Sarbin argued, human behaviour would be understood in terms of the context that makes the behaviour meaningful to the actor, the narrative form with which we connect events together to make a meaningful account. Sarbin continued to develop this theme over the next 30 years- his now classic paper "The narrative as root metaphor for psychology" was published in his 1986 edited collection "Narrative Psychology: The storied nature of human conduct" and he is now seen as one of the founding fathers of the burgeoning field of 'narrative psychology'. As I rediscovered Sarbin's earlier work through my new-found constructivist lenses I began to follow him through his emerging writings on narrative during my early years as a lecturer.

What was exciting to me was that these constructivist ideas were being applied not just to the individual person but to the entire project of psychology and of science itself and to those cultures and societies that were principally engaged in the processes of constructing the scientific disciplines. The fundamental idea of PCP (expressed as Kelly's fundamental postulate)- constructive alternativism- now seemed a possible framework for understanding not just the ideas and behaviour of individual persons but of whole societies. Sarbin's now classic edited collection contained a contribution by Ken and Mary Gergen (Gergen and

Gergen, 1986), and I found that Ken Gergen, like Sarbin, had proposed a contextualist, historical metaphor for psychology back in 1973 in a paper entitled 'Social Psychology as History' where he argued that, as psychologists, our theories of social behavior are primarily reflections of contemporary history rather than objective formulations.

From these discoveries, it was not long before I came across Gergen's now classic 1985 paper "The social constructionist movement in modern psychology" and over the next several years I enthusiastically studied this emerging field, struggling with such beasts as poststructuralism, postmodernism and discourse analysis, eventually writing my own book "An introduction to Social Constructionism" which was published in 1995. There was of course no mention of PCP in any of the material I had encountered. Apart from Gergen's classic contribution, social constructionism appeared to be a profoundly European movement and seemed to owe more to the thinking of French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida than to George Kelly and his followers.

Nevertheless, the similarities between the fundamental concepts of PCP and social constructionist ideas seemed to me to be considerable, and I was eager to combine them in my own thinking. Other PCP scholars such as Mike Mahoney, Jim Mancuso, Jon Raskin and Dusan Stojnov have over the years notably, have also pointed out the similarity between PCP and social constructionism in many of their theoretical assumptions (Mahoney, 1988; Mancuso, 1995; Raskin, 2002; Stojnov and Butt, 2002) and have been keen to develop PCP along constructionist lines. I spoke about these similarities as I saw them at the EPCA conference in York in 1992, where, as ever, my presentation was sympathetically received and the paper was subsequently published in Alan Thompson & Peter Cummins' edited collection. It is no accident in my view that the PCP fraternity is one generally tolerant of new constructions in the form of speculative ideas.

These similarities between PCP and the emerging perspective of social constructionism I felt could be summed up as follows:

1. Firstly, both deny there is anything fundamental about what we regard as human nature- there are an infinite number of ways of construing events, of attaching meaning to them. Nothing in our social world, including people, comes bearing labels. The person is a created, constructed phenomenon. In this respect, PCP stands in stark contrast to much of mainstream psychology. Trait theorists, psychodynamic theorists and humanistic psychologists may disagree about the essential nature of human beings- yet importantly they all propose that there IS an essential nature to humans, and that, in varying degrees, the hand we are personally dealt in life's card game determines our psychological character. Indeed, in western societies I believe we are becoming increasingly enchanted by a reductionist biological determinism- we seem to delight in reports that, for example, we may have discovered the gene for homosexuality, alcoholism or criminality. Neither PCP nor social constructionism would have any truck with such ideas. Behaviourism is perhaps alone in the mainstream psychological world in offering a view of the person as having no essential nature.
2. Secondly, both offer a stark contrast to traditional psychologies, in highlighting the nature of these theories of human nature as constructions. They both argue that alternative accounts of the person should have no particular claim to the label of fact or truth- although some may be more useful than others. Whereas trait theory, psychodynamic theory and evolutionary psychology do not question their own claims to truth, George Kelly significantly proposed that his theory of Personal Constructs should be adopted until a better construction of the person came along. And here 'better' means more useful, not more accurate or truthful. Likewise, social

constructionism is radically skeptical of truth claims, especially where these relate to the nature of people in general or to individuals.

3. And thirdly, both focus upon accounts, upon the narratives through which people live out their lives, the representations of themselves and their world that they offer each other.

Despite these important similarities, it began to occur to me that there was something important missing from social constructionist accounts- the person as a psychological being. It seemed to me that social constructionism entailed an almost complete absence of a psychological being from its understanding of social life- the person, theoretically speaking, had almost ceased to exist here. At that time, the very different social constructionist work of people who today we might refer to as Discursive Psychologists or Critical Psychologists or Discourse Analysts and so on was not so differentiated. Nevertheless, in various ways social constructionist theory and research seemed to either ignore or even deny the psychological being that had been the centre of attention since psychology emerged as a discipline. For example, the work of those who today go by the name of Discursive Psychologists focused only on the nature and workings of the accounts that are built by people in interactions of various kinds. The person building those accounts was 'bracketed off' and not subject to enquiry. This seemed to me a disingenuous stance. The person was 'emptied' of psychological content such as attitudes, beliefs, motivations and so on- these things were social constructions and not (as the behaviourists would agree) motivators of behaviour. Nevertheless, discursive psychologists inevitably on occasions needed to refer to the person producing accounts and could not help but make attributions about their motivations for building an account in a particular way. It seemed to me that the person as a psychological being was always implicit in such discursive work.

Those social constructionists who preferred to take their lead from Foucault focused on the constructive power of widespread social discourses. Within this form of social constructionism, the coherence and unity of the self with which we in the western world are familiar is replaced by fragmentation. The person's identity and subjectivity is seen as constantly shifting as it is produced through the various discourses, social practices and relationships in which the person is caught up from moment to moment. This very notion of the self is seen as a social construction, and our experience of being a person, our identity, is explained not as arising from any essential states or processes, but as constructed in and derived from the wider cultural and linguistic realm in which we all move. The self here is not a way of accounting for social phenomena, but an outcome of them. In its extreme form, the person appears only as a vehicle through which discourses may manifest themselves. It seemed to me dismayingly determinist, replacing the biological and psychological determinism of mainstream psychology with a social determinism that was certainly different, but no better.

As a psychologist, I felt strongly that there was a place for a theory of the person in social constructionism. Of course, this theory of the person would need to be radically different from what mainstream psychologists had been used to- a being perhaps filled with measurable quantities of various traits or driven by unconscious forces beyond their own understanding. But a person without the ability for reflection on their experience and without the power to make choices between alternatives they perceived to be available to them would indeed be nothing more than a vehicle for the manifestation of discourses. So it seemed important to me to adopt a model of the person consistent with social constructionism that, while rejecting the essentialism so contested by constructionists, would retain the important concepts of meaningful action and choice.

PCP, that most constructivist psychologists, would surely be able to make a contribution to understanding the person in a socially constructed world. So, Trevor and I set about writing a paper outlining how PCP might complement social constructionism. But our attempts to publish this proved unsuccessful (Burr and Butt, 1993). And in fact when we presented these ideas to constructionist-minded social psychologists at conferences they were not well received. Our attempt to put back a meaning-making, agentic individual into the social constructionist framework was largely seen as a misguided, perhaps even sentimental, slide back into the liberal humanism from which social constructionists were so eager to distance themselves. And so constructivism and constructionism, these two terms that we encounter in academic writing and that sound so similar, have different meanings, with the term 'constructivism' referring to theoretical perspectives (including PCP) where the emphasis is on the constructive agency of the person in creating their phenomenal world, and the very similar term 'constructionism' (or social constructionism) being used to refer to perspectives emphasising the constructive power of social forces and language to shape our personhood. The gap between these seemed unbridgeable, with constructivist theories seen as uncritically accepting the agentic self underlying behaviour and constructionist theories regarding this self as no more than a discursive, even ideological, construction.

Given that social constructionist ideas have generally come from outside the discipline of psychology, it is unsurprising that the nature of personhood has not been at the centre of debate. This was simply not the question that it primarily set out to address. And I feel that social constructionism has been and continues to be an enormously valuable critical voice in psychology, challenging psychology's taken-for-granted assumptions. But at that time it was not ready to take seriously any attempt to theorise the individual person. However it seemed to me that, challenging though it would be, it should in principle be possible to build a model of the self and of human personhood that did not involve an uncritical slide back

into the essentialism and liberal humanism so rejected by constructionists, and I felt (and still feel) that this is an important goal for psychologists to aim towards.

The personal construct community appeared to be more open to alternative constructions, and, with the welcome collaboration of Richard Bell, Trevor and I subsequently undertook, and later published, a small empirical study using a repertory grid to explore people's experience of selfhood in terms of fragmentation and unity (Burr et al, 1997). We asked people to construe themselves in a number of different relationships with others and found that people did indeed find very different experiences of self in different relationships. This plurality in our experience of ourselves is something that Miller-Mair (Mair, 1977) has described in his idea of the 'community of self' and it is what constructionists mean by fragmentation. However all of our participants, almost paradoxically, made use of a construct that could be described as: 'can be myself vs put on an act'. They retained a sense of self that seemed to transcend that fragmentation and that was important to them. This self is more of a social, interpersonal construction rather than the individual, personal invention than PCP might suggest, with a plurality of selves produced in joint actions with others. Yet there is still a personal constructor in this social process. People can 'recognise' themselves in some encounters (which we may characterise as roles or discursive positions) and not others, and this testifies to a 'sense of self'.

This is a constructed self-theory rather than the essentialist self of traditional psychology, but nevertheless it provides an important platform from which the person can act. Together with Franz Epting, Trevor and I later wrote about this in terms of the notion of 'core construing' (1998), suggesting that this might be better conceptualized as a 'core process', a process of building and living out a narrative of ourselves- a story of our lives if you like- that we are responsible for but which is to some degree inevitably told and experienced in terms dictated by the social and cultural world in which we move. So the self here is both a personal and a social construction, needing both constructivist and

constructionist theories to properly understand it. Other PCP scholars, such as Bob and Greg Neimeyer and Luis Botella, have likewise been keen to see PCP as an important member of a family of constructivist theories, reflecting postmodern trends in the construction of social reality (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993a; Botella, 1995).

Meanwhile, in the social constructionist world, some writers had begun to raise concerns about how social constructionism dealt with (or rather didn't deal with) subjectivity and experience. Carla Willig, whose work I greatly respect, was one of the first to point to this as a deficiency in social constructionist accounts of the person, and the strand of constructionism that draws on Foucault has now embraced subjectivity as an important focus of research, and aims to cast light on the way in which prevailing discourses inform our personal experience and sense of self. This is something that has a parallel life in PCP through the concepts of commonality and sociality, in the idea that people who share a common culture will inevitably make sense of their experience through a similar set of constructs. For example, Harry Procter has used the notion of 'family constructs' when working with families in difficulty.

Nevertheless, understanding individual differences- which PCP does so well- is not a central concern for social constructionists. Different people positioned within the same discourses of, say, gender or age, do not necessarily engage with these or live them out in the same way. For psychologists (rather than sociologists or social theorists, for example) individual human experience and conduct should be an important concern. Social constructionism provides a vital challenge to psychology's essentialism and ahistoricism and it has given us a way of understanding being a person that draws attention to the powerful cultural and linguistic realm within which we all move. But I think it often falls short of giving us a grasp on the experience of individual persons at a sufficiently micro level to be of use to them.

Looking back now at what Trevor and I wrote sixteen years ago, I am surprised at how much I would still defend today. Many Personal Construct theorists have embraced the postmodern constructionist turn in psychology and there still seems to me no theoretical reason why PCP should not be used to elaborate the model of the person suggested by social constructionism, especially where

personal experience and change are the focus of interest. Much less likely candidates, such as psychodynamic theory, have, surprisingly, been drawn on by social constructionists in the past. In reality, the barriers may have more to do with misperceptions of PCP (and it is often poorly misunderstood by mainstream psychologists) and a lingering knee-jerk prejudice against its North American optimism and belief in personal agency. And there is much in PCP that would be of value to the social constructionist in research and practice, from the simple use of propositional or invitational thinking to the whole range of innovative methods that PCP scholars and practitioners have developed.

I must leave my narrative there- the problem that I have been talking about is one that, from where I stand in psychology, may not exercise others who have different, perhaps more practical, concerns. And finding a way to foreground PCP in a constructionist psychology is not straightforward. With the benefit of time, experience and hindsight, I now feel this probably has less to do with resolving theoretical tensions on paper and more to do with introducing PCP to key people, and to disseminating its practical uses in constructionist circles. At the coal-face of research and practice, theoretical tensions are often forgotten amid the need to find a way of doing things that work for one's purposes- almost a definition of a construct! Perhaps, as that grand old master of social psychology Serge Moscovici revealed, if you shout loud enough and long enough, eventually people will listen!

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